

Mourn or rejoice on Tish'a b'Av?

Tish'a B'Av

Saddest day on Jewish calendar. History full of catastrophic events that befell Jews on Tish'a B'Av (accidentally or intentionally):

-From Mishnah [Ta'anit 4:6]:

- The spies Moses sent to scout the Promised Land brought back a largely negative report which demoralized the Israelites,
- Both Temples destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE),
- The Bar Kochba revolt against Rome failed in 135 CE when he was killed and the city of Betar was destroyed, and
- Jerusalem was razed a year later, and the Exile began.

-Since then, on Tish'a b'Av:

- A Pope began the Crusades, slaughtering Jews on the way;
- Cartloads of handwritten Talmuds burned in Paris;
- Jews were expelled from England, France and Spain;
- False Messiah Shabtai Tzvi was born;
- World War I began, leading to World War II; and
- The Nazis ordered the Final Solution: The Holocaust.

Since then, we have been mourning all this:

- In the three weeks leading to Tish'a b'Av, we must not play or listen to music, conduct weddings, shave or cut our hair, or wear new clothes.
- In the 9 days prior, we must not eat meat, drink wine, or wear fresh clothes.
- On Tish'a b'Av itself, we must fast for a whole day. We eat hard-boiled eggs and "ashes" before the fast begins. We must not wash, apply lotions, wear leather shoes, have sex, or even greet one another. We must sit on the floor or on low stools and read the Book of Lamentations under dim lights. We must refrain from learning or discussing anything that is not sad.

Question

Why must we mark Tish'a b'Av as we do? Should we remember, mourn and commemorate so intensely all the terrible things that have happened to us?

-After all, Pessah, Hanukkah, and Purim are celebrated as joyous holidays, even though they recall times when we endured slavery, religious coercion, and a collective death sentence. So why shouldn't Tish'a b'Av be a joyous time as well?

-One can argue: Pessah, Hanukkah, and Purim are celebrated as joyous holidays, because we won: From slavery to physical freedom, from religious coercion to religious freedom, from a death sentence to life. But Tish'a b'Av commemorates events when we did not win:

- The destroyed Temple was not rebuilt
 - But a modern Judaism, anchored in ethical behavior, study and services, emerged and flourished in many lands!
- The six million will not come back
 - But neither will those who died in the events of Pessah, Hanukkah and Purim
 - And the State of Israel and a Jewish renaissance ensued!
- The expulsion from Spain was never undone
 - But it led to spread of Jewish culture and to Jewish achievements elsewhere. Example: I am glad *I* was forced out of Egypt!

Point is: Judaism survived in ALL cases. Isn't that cause for celebration?

Of course, we must remind *non-Jews* of what happened to us. But how intensely must we remember it ourselves? Can't it be paralyzing?

Jews remember

First, we Jews REMEMBER. The Torah *commands* us to remember a lot of things -- happy and sad. Here is where the injunction to remember -- “*zakhor!*” appears:

Slavery (sad):

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. [Deut. 5:15; 15:5; 16:12; 24:18]

The Exodus (happy):

Remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life. [Deuteronomy 16:3]

The Revelation at Sinai (happy):

But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life. And you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb. [Deuteronomy 4:9–10]

Amalek (sad):

You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt... when you were faint and weary... You shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget! [Deuteronomy 25:17–19]

Rebellion (sad):

Remember, do not forget, how you angered the Lord, your God, in the desert; from the day that you went out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebelling against the Lord. [Deuteronomy 9:7]

Miriam badmouthing Moses and her punishment (sad):

Remember what the Lord, your God, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt. [Deuteronomy 24:9]

Shabbat (happy):

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. [Exodus 20:8]

BUT: Torah does not spell out the manner in which we remember:
Gloomy or festive.

Two anecdotes:

1-Abba Eban to Truman:

At a formal dinner in Washington, in May 1952, the Israeli Ambassador, Abba Eban, told President Truman:

We do not have orders or decorations. Our material strength is small and greatly strained. We have no tradition of formality or chivalry. One thing, however, is within the power of Israel to confer. It is the gift of immortality. Those whose names are bound up with Israel's history never become forgotten. We are, therefore, now writing the name of President Truman upon the map of our country.

Eban recalls:

As I left the rostrum I saw the tough-minded President burying his face in a handkerchief without any effort to restrain his emotion. The next day he sent me a letter asking me for a text of my address: "You spoke so flatteringly about me that for a moment I had the impression that I was dead".

2-Napoleon on Tish'a b'Av

Napoleon was traveling through Europe. He entered a synagogue. There he saw everybody weeping, sitting on the floor on small stools holding candles while reading from books. Napoleon asked an aide why the people were weeping. He was told they fast and mourn the destruction of their Temple and the loss of their land. Napoleon asked how many years have they been doing this and was told it was almost 2000 years earlier. Napoleon exclaimed:

A nation that cries and fasts for so long over the loss of their land and their Temple will surely be rewarded with their land and their Temple.

Memory allowed us to last. Judaism itself is founded on collective memory of revelation at Sinai. Baal Shem Tov [founder of Hasidism] taught:

Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.

Visitors to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem see these words as they leave the museum.

Is it the rabbis who are forcing us to mourn?

No! That's what the people want, sometimes OVER the objections of the rabbis! Book of Esther says about the fast days:

...As [the Jews] had decreed for themselves and for their seed, in the matter of fasting and lamenting [Esther 9:31].

The rabbis had to convince the people to mourn LESS. Talmud:

Our Rabbis taught: When the [second] Temple was destroyed... large numbers in Israel became ascetics, binding themselves not to eat meat or drink wine.

-Rabbi Yehoshua... asked them: My sons, why do you not eat meat or drink wine?

-They replied: Shall we eat flesh which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar is in abeyance? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now no longer?

-He said to them: If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased.

-They said: [That is so, and] we can manage with fruit.

-[He said:] We should not eat fruit either, because there is no longer an offering of first fruits.

-[They said:] Then we can manage with other fruits.

-[He said:] But we should not drink water, because there is no longer the ceremony of the pouring of water, [*Simchat Bet HaShoevah*, which used to be performed on Sukkot when the Temple was standing].

-To this they could find no answer, so he said to them: My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn too much is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure...

-The Sages therefore have ruled as follows. A man may paint his house, but he should leave a small area bare. A man may prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. A woman may put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two...

[Baba Batra 60b]

Perhaps mourning will stop when the consequences of what is being mourned have been erased?

If so, they should have stopped mourning and fasting on Tish'a b'Av during Second Temple period (586 years!)? They didn't! [Rambam on Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:3] Why? The people wanted it!

Four fast days commemorate the First Temple's destruction:

- 10th Tevet: Siege of Jerusalem by Babylon, culminating in the destruction of the First Temple and the conquest of Judah

- Tish'a b'Av: Destruction of First Temple

- Gedalia: Assassination of the righteous governor of Judah, ending Jewish autonomy after destruction of the First Temple

- 17th Tammuz: Breach of Jerusalem walls, leading to destruction of Temple. [Was 9th for first Temple, changed to 17th for second.]

After the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple, they wondered: To continue mourning or not? With independence regained and Temple rebuilt, should we weep or be glad? The prophet Zechariah said to be glad, but the people refused!

[People were asking:] Should I weep... separating myself, as I have done... for... seventy years...? [Zech. 7:3-5]

The Lord of Hosts said as follows: The [four fast days] shall become to the house of Judah days of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts. [Zech. 8:19]

God said to rejoice on Tish'a b'Av!! So why didn't we? The Talmud answers:

Rabbi Hanah ben Bizna has said in the name of Rabbi Shim'on the Just: What is the meaning of [that] verse?... Rav Papa replied: What it means is this: When there is peace, [these days] shall be days of joy and gladness; when there is persecution, they shall be fast days; when there is no persecution but yet not peace, then those who desire may fast and those who desire need not fast. [They asked:] If that is the case, [should the fast of] Tish'a b'Av also [be optional]? Rav Papa replied: Tish'a b'Av is in a different category, because several misfortunes happened on it... [Rosh HaShana 18b]

However, some rabbis had different opinions:

Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] planted something on Purim [not allowed back then], and bathed in the [bathhouse of the] marketplace of Sepphoris on the 17th of Tammuz [a fast day] and [even] sought to abolish the fast of Tish'a b'Av, but his colleagues would not agree.

Rabbi Abba ben Zabda ventured to remark: Rabbi, this was not the case. What happened was that Tish'a b'Av [on that year] fell on Shabbat, and [the rabbis] postponed it till [right] after Shabbat, and he said to them, Since it has been postponed, let it be postponed altogether [until next year], but the Sages would not agree...

[Rabbi Eleazar then said: I stand corrected.] [Meg. 5a-b]

The great Rabbi was in favor of less mourning! Also:

Long ago, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva... were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They fell weeping [except] Rabbi Akiba who laughed.

They said to him: "Why are you laughing?"

He said: "Why are you weeping?"

They said to him: "A [holy] place... has now become the haunt of foxes, and we should not weep?"

He said to them: "Here is why I am laughing. [The prophecy in Micah says:]

Because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field, [and Jerusalem shall become heaps of rubble] [Micah 3:12]

[But the later prophecy of] Zechariah says:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Old men and old women shall again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem [and every man with his staff in his hand for the fullness of days. And the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.] [Zech. 8:4-5]

As long as [the first prophecy of doom] had not been fulfilled, I was uncertain whether the second one [of a bright future] would be fulfilled.

But now that [the first] prophecy has been fulfilled, it is quite certain that [the second] will also be fulfilled [in the future]!"

They said: "Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us!" [Makkot 24a-b]

This line concludes the tractate!

Possible reasons why people want it

Facts:

-Observance of Tisha B'Av has increased steadily, in number observing and in severity of strictures.

-2010 survey: 25% of Israelis fast on Tish'a b'Av, and another 50% will not engage in recreational activities although they do not fast.

-People feel deeply that some days of mourning are necessary to balance the joyful celebrations. When some early Reform Jews favored celebrating Tisha B'Av as a day of rejoicing, because the Temple's destruction led to what they thought was a better Judaism, the majority shelved the idea and decided to ignore the day. Today, many Reform congregations observe Tisha B'Av as a sad day in some form.

-The destruction of the first Temple proved that it *could* be destroyed, something many Jews at the time could not believe ("God won't allow His house to be destroyed."). We mourn to remind ourselves that no matter what the current conditions, calamities CAN befall us again.

-By publicly remembering sad events, we remind gentiles of what antisemitism has done to us Jews, but also remind them that many of them helped us:

- Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, contains the names of more than 20,000 righteous gentiles who saved Jews from Nazis.

- Spielberg's genius in his movie *Schindler's List*: Publicize the Holocaust through a righteous gentile other gentiles can identify with.

Conclusion

Memory of bad events is necessary, but must be positive:

- Not to make anybody feel guilty,
- Not to exact vengeance,
- Not to be given as a reason to stay Jewish.

The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim famously said: Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory!

- Not a good reason to stay Jewish...

The Book of Lamentations concludes with the line that closes the Torah service:

Hashiveinu Hashem elecha, venashuva. Chadesh yamenu k'kedem.
Bring us back to You, O God, and we shall come back. Renew our days as of old. [Lam. 5:21]

May this be the last Tish'a b'Av we spend in mourning.